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City to assess its new 'Studio' curriculum because of protests

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**BODY:**

Baltimore schools Chief Executive Officer Bonnie S. Copeland said yesterday that she is convening a team to review the controversial Studio Course reading and writing curriculum implemented in city middle schools this fall.

The team will include teachers, administrators and state managers overseeing special education, Copeland said. She said she has taken to heart the concerns she has heard about the program - including sharp criticism from the head of Baltimore's Senate delegation.

Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden says his office has been flooded with calls from angry parents since an article in The Sun on Sunday outlined the program, which uses teen magazines and places grammar on the back burner. One of the magazines used is CosmoGIRL!, whose current issue includes tips on making out.

"It's an insult, and it must be discontinued immediately," said McFadden, the Senate majority leader. "As a member of the Budget and Tax Committee, I have to go down there and fight in Annapolis to bring back resources to the [city school] system. There is no logical way this can be defended."

Of the people selling the curriculum, which has cost the city schools at least \$2 million to implement this year, McFadden said: "I have a sentence they may need to diagram: You are fired. ... Get the noun and the verb right in that one. Action: are fired. Subject: you."

Copeland said she expects the review team to be in place next week. She said its charge is "to look at what's working, to look at what may not be working, and to make midcourse corrections as quickly as possible."

"We are responding to the concerns that people have raised," she said. "As we see they are valid, we will make changes."

Sally Mentor Hay, director of Studio Learning Inc., said in a statement that the review team is "a great idea."

"It's a strong curriculum," said Mentor Hay, who is working as a consultant to the city school system. "I'm

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confident they're going to be pleased and will recognize it's what they want the students in Baltimore to learn."

Mentor Hay said Studio is "very closely aligned" to what children must learn for Maryland's standardized tests. In the Sun article, state Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick called for an audit of Studio to see whether it is teaching those standards, and teachers expressed concern that children are not being adequately prepared for the tests.

Mentor Hay said Studio "holds high expectations for students," teaching them to read and write in a variety of genres and to think critically. She said Copeland's review team will "see that the curriculum takes very seriously teaching students the conventions of written English, including grammar, punctuation, spelling, editing of their writing."

In an earlier interview, Mentor Hay said the curriculum does not focus on conventions initially. "The first thing is to build some fluency in writing, not to shut it down with overemphasis on spelling and grammar," she said last month. "That's not to say we don't teach it. We do. Easily the first six weeks in the program, that is not the focus. The focus is to get these kids to realize they have something to say."

The idea behind Studio, Mentor Hay has said, is to improve children's reading and writing by getting them to read and write more, and to realize that reading and writing are beneficial to them. It requires schools to spend 90 minutes a day, half on writing and half on reading, and each classroom to have at least 800 books.

In Baltimore, one of the most controversial elements of the curriculum has been a worksheet, distributed at a school board meeting last month, that defines a noun as "stuff" and a verb as "what stuff does."

"We don't need 'stuff' for our children," McFadden said this week. "We need a rigorous educational curriculum based on sound educational principles. Anything less is unacceptable."

Marvin "Doc" Cheatham, president of the Baltimore branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said the curriculum "is dumbing down our children. You can't put it any other way."

Studio was implemented this fall in all 21 of Baltimore's traditional middle schools, plus two alternative schools and one K-8 school. School system officials said they were making a drastic change in instruction because of dismal middle school test scores. The school board approved the use of the curriculum in July for the school year beginning in August.

The newspaper's review found that not all Baltimore teachers were trained to teach Studio before it was implemented this fall, though the curriculum requires extensive training. Schools are individually responsible for purchasing thousands of books necessary to implement the curriculum properly, but with limited resources, some schools don't have all the books and others have little money for anything else.

The curriculum has a track record in only one other city, Denver, where Mentor Hay was chief academic officer until this year. Reading and writing test scores have been flat in the four years since Studio was adopted. A new superintendent and chief academic officer there are also contemplating changes.

In a letter to The Sun this week, Mentor Hay said she did not benefit financially from the Studio contract in Denver. She said the Denver school system paid the author of the curriculum directly.

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